

The Palm Beach Post

January 27, 2007 Saturday
FINAL EDITION

PORTRAIT OF A 'SONGWRITER'S SONGWRITER'

By HAP ERSTEIN
Palm Beach Post Theater Writer

When you write some 1,300 songs - for Hollywood, Broadway or just to entertain partygoers - it is not easy to contain your life and career in a 90-minute biography. Still, *Heart & Soul: The Life and Music of Frank Loesser* (airing tonight on WXEL-Ch. 42, 9:30-11 p.m.) is a first-rate portrait of the composer-lyricist of such shows as *Guys & Dolls*, *The Most Happy Fella* and *How To Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, aimed at musical comedy fans, as well as casual listeners who, as the program insists, may know his songs but probably do not know the man's name.

The show takes a largely chronological approach to Loesser's life, from his roots in a German immigrant family of serious musicians indifferent to his commercial pop style, through to his Hollywood songwriter-for-hire days that produced such breakout gems as *Baby, It's Cold Outside* and *Two Sleepy People*, to his Broadway triumphs and his death, at a mere 59, from lung cancer.

Like Stephen Sondheim many years later, Loesser would begin as a lyricist, collaborating with such composers as Hoagy Carmichael, Jule Styne and Jimmy McHugh, before he was allowed to write his own music. That began in earnest with his first Broadway show, 1948's *Where's Charley?*, and only because designated composer Harold Arlen withdrew when his house burned down.

The documentary's writer-director Walter J. Gottlieb does a crafty job of summarizing Loesser's life, his work methods and his notorious temper, while leaving plenty of time for musical numbers. Understandably, there is an overreliance on the movie versions of his Broadway hits, but Gottlieb also digs up some rare footage of the stage shows, even resorting to a high school production of *Guys & Dolls* to demonstrate how far reaching Loesser's output became.

Loesser was a songwriter's songwriter, a point underscored by the inclusion of such complimentary talking heads as Jerry Herman (*Hello, Dolly!*), Maury Yeston (*Titanic*) Jerry Adler (*The Pajama Game*) and Mark Hollmann (*Urinetown*). Providing the personal side are his second wife, Jo Sullivan (original female lead of *Most Happy Fella*), his biographer-daughter Susan and his son John, the executive director of Stuart's Lyric Theatre.

Guys & Dolls, generally acknowledged as one of the few perfect Broadway musicals ever written, takes up a sizeable part of the program, but time is also found for significant mentions of flops *Greenwillow* and *Pleasures and Palaces*, plus a show called *Senor Discretion Himself*, first produced posthumously in 2004.

Loesser's body of work stands out for its simplicity and its sophistication, qualities also much in evidence in this film biography.

hap_erstein@pbpost.com

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